



## Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

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### Abraham Lincoln in New Salem

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Abraham Lincoln is known as a great leader, a man of integrity, and a man of honesty. He was the sixteenth president: he freed slaves, and he was president during the Civil War. The years in New Salem were instrumental in forming him into a leader.

On February 12, 1819, Abraham Lincoln was born in Kentucky. In 1831, at the age of twenty two, he left his parents to sail down the Sangamon River with his friend John Hanks and his step brother John Johnston. They had been hired by Denton Offutt, a colorful man of the frontier, to take produce to New Orleans. On his way he encountered New Salem, and this is where Abe Lincoln had experiences that would help him become a great leader.

On his way to New Salem, his raft became stuck on the mill dam. He borrowed a tool from the shop to drill a hole in the raft, so that the water would empty from the raft. Abraham Lincoln impressed Offutt, the clerk, by the way he freed his raft from the milldam. Offutt was so impressed that he offered Abraham Lincoln a job at his store.

Since the store was not open when Lincoln got back from New Orleans, Lincoln decided to pilot a steamboat down the river to Beardstown until the store opened. Offutt began to brag about how strong Abe Lincoln was, and how he could throw any man in New Salem. Jack Armstrong, the local strongman, was not going to tolerate this. Jack challenged Lincoln to a wrestling match. Neither man could throw the other, but Lincoln was declared the winner.

Lincoln wanted to learn math and grammar. He asked Mentor Graham, the school master, to teach him math and grammar, and loaned books for him to read. He was industrious.

Lincoln threw his hat in the ring for state legislature. Black Hawk soon interrupted Lincoln's campaign. Lincoln volunteered to join the local militia to fight in the Black Hawk Indian War. His company voted him captain of their group. He was a natural leader. Lincoln re-enlisted three more times, but saw no action. Lincoln said, "We fought off more mosquitoes than we did Indians." Lincoln earned one hundred and twenty five dollars for three months service. In 1832 Lincoln lost the election. Some people like to say it was only because of the Indian war.

To raise money, Lincoln began to do chores from house to house, while swapping stories and getting votes. William F. Berry and Abraham Lincoln became business partners. They were not doing too well selling merchandise together. Much of the inventory bought from other merchants was liquor, which Lincoln made no effort to sell. Nothing Berry said to encourage selling liquor would change Lincoln's mind. William F. Berry died, which left Lincoln in what he called the "National Debt." To help pay off his debt, Lincoln took the postmaster job. Although the pay was little, he was able to read dozens of newspapers every week. He was also a deputy surveyor. He used both offices from which to campaign for the legislature.

Lincoln ran for state legislature again in 1834 and won this time. He was then able to pay off the large debt. This is one of the many reasons people called Abraham Lincoln, "Honest Abe."

Lincoln was only in New Salem for seven years. In 1837, Lincoln moved to Springfield to become a lawyer. In 1861, he became the president of the United States. Abraham Lincoln showed honesty by paying off the large debt. He demonstrated his industrious side with jobs, such as postmaster and surveyor. Abe learned how to teach himself without having the opportunity to go to school. His company recognized him as a leader in the Black Hawk Indian War. All these traits that were evident during Abraham Lincoln's time in New Salem were important in making him the great leader he became. [From Philip Kunhardt, Jr., Philip Kunhardt, III, and Peter Kunhardt, *Lincoln*; Stefan Lorant, *The Life of Abraham Lincoln*; The National Park Service; *Lincoln's New Salem Days*, <http://www.nps.gov/archive/liho/newsalem.htm> (Sept. 11, 2008); and Susan Sloate, *Abraham Lincoln the Freedom President*.]